

The City's Treasures

Exploring the Egyptian Rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

NEW YORK CITY is the home of infinite treasure which the average citizen seldom sees. The following article deals with the Department of Egyptian Art at the Metropolitan Museum and is the first of a series of articles that will take the reader by pleasant and easy steps through the vast and interesting public exhibitions that are brought to the world's metropolis from the far ends of the earth.

By Louis Lee Arms

PASSING through the turnstile at the Fifth Avenue entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art one comes to the Egyptian rooms by walking in a northerly direction.

By this simple process one may age 5,000 or 6,000 years, for in turning to the right he finds himself almost immediately surrounded by articles of great antiquity, ranging in size and variety from the Tomb of Perneb to a falence bracelet originally worn by a "sub-deb" along the Nile.

Here age is a prime consideration. Mummies that have withstood the chemistry of thousands of years lie quite still (not that anything else could be expected of them). The bones of a middle class Egyptian, who turned up his toes in the good old days of 4000 B. C. rest in the long shadow thrown by a granite column from the pyramid temple of King Sahura. By the measure of Egyptology this middle class Egyptian, who may have been a quarry worker, outranks the king, for it was not until 2650 B. C. that Sahura gave up the ghost. Thus while the granite column is accepted as a treasure it is 1,400 years less important than the withered bones of the ancient artisan.

Illustrious dynasties roll past the eye. There are mixed with purely ornamental objects, such as a low relief of a young prince stroking the head of his pet hoopoe bird, practical things, such as hand mirrors, bronze razors, tweezers and other toilet articles and baubles. Although the razors have traveled down the broad highway of many corroding centuries, they might still be used with less of tonsorial casualty than is registered through our comic weeklies. The mirrors are bronze of face and stone of handle. By briskly polishing the bronze face of the mirror the Egyptian belle or grandee saw herself or himself perfectly reflected to the last bitter freckle.

Collection Here 13 Years

To begin at the beginning, the Metropolitan Museum's Egyptian expedition was organized in 1906, with Albert M. Lythgoe as curator. It was the desire of the trustees to develop a collection on the basis of excavation, and with that purpose an expedition was organized and went almost immediately into the field.

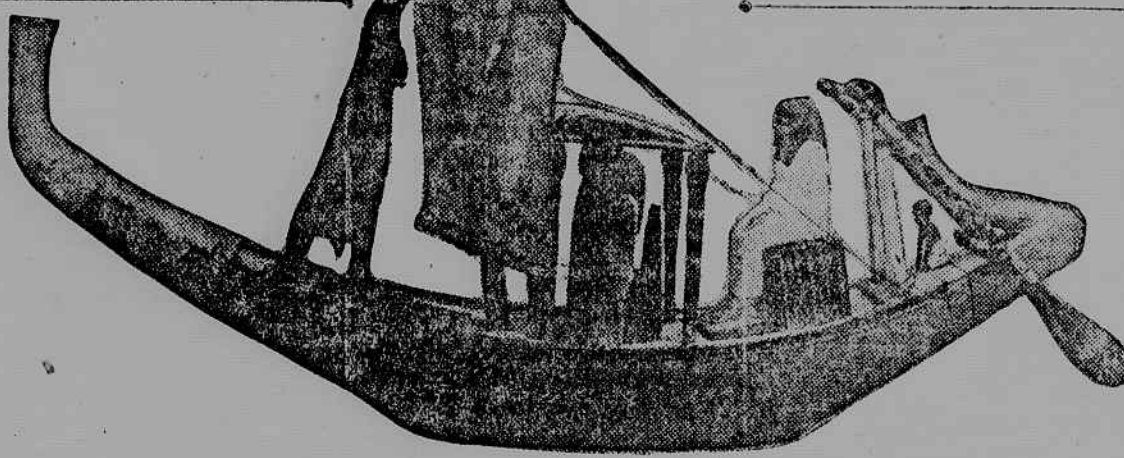
The work has expanded and increased until in recent years the working staff has consisted of ten archaeologists, engineers and surveyors, while 350 to 400 skilled native workmen are employed.

The expedition holds two important concessions from the Egyptian government, one at Thebes and one at the pyramids of Lisht. Thebes is the headquarters, and here there is a large expedition house with living and working rooms and drafting and photographic laboratories. Excavation is being carried on among the tombs of ancient Thebes and also among the mortuary-temples of the kings of the Theban Empire, who ruled from 1500 to 1000 B. C. The expedition also has been working continuously since 1910 on the excavation of the palace of Amenhotep III, and this work is just approaching completion.

At Lisht the department has been

engaged since it took the field in 1906 in the excavation of two pyramids and adjacent cemeteries of kings and their court officials of the twelfth dynasty, which takes in that period between 2000 and 1900 B. C. Amenemhat I and his son and successor, Sesotris I, were the rulers of that time.

From this work the museum is receiving a great variety of objects and material illustrating nearly



every phase of ancient Egyptian artistic and industrial life.

Preparation for Death

The climate and the quality of the soil on the terrain of Egypt are excellently suited to the purposes of preservation. Since Egypt once had the distinction of being at the bottom of the sea, its soil retains salts and chemicals which in their native element build up resistance to disintegration. Even so, the ancient Egyptian would be as much of an unknown equation as the average North American Indian of a similar period were it not for the fact that when the Egyptian died he preferred to do so with all possible flourish, and began rather early in life to make arrangement for the preservation of his flesh and bones.

We may assume that after an Egyptian had salted away enough of the world's goods to preclude the possibility of want he immediately became obsessed with the desire to build his tomb. Forthwith he called up the latest catalogues on the subject and pored over them in the hope of finding a tomb that would set him off to advantage. Often nothing would do but that he must design his own tomb.

Original Twists

In trying to outdo his neighbors he contrived to give original twists to the boiler plate designs, and he then began operations on a scale accommodated to his pocketbook. The size of some of these tombs suggests a process in involuntary bankruptcy, but of this there is no record. Finally the Egyptian laid himself down to die, having first taken the precaution, as Herodotus affirms, to have his bones pickled in brine for ninety days from the date of his death.

Such is the tomb of Perneb. It is the biggest thing in the museum's Egyptian rooms, occupying some four or five hundred square feet of space in the main corridor. Perneb we may understand to have been an Egyptian gentleman of parts, holding office under the king at Memphis more than 4,500 years ago, or in 2650 B. C. When he had reached the station of "Companion to the King" he felt a strange sense of something ailing him, which upon analysis proved to be that as yet he had made no provision for his tomb. There was no cure for the mental perturbation save the ordering of rock from a quarry hard by and the designing of two tombs, one—and the larger—for himself and the second for his son, Shepesre, who so far as the Metropolitan Museum is concerned is a figure of no great importance.

Perneb had his stone blocks marked in the quarry with his title "Companion." Indeed, the majority of the blocks on the facade and chambers were so marked, an act which must have distressed the Egyptian dignitary, for later he was

It was only last week that this tomb, which is constructed of Egyptian limestone impregnated with sea salts that make for efflorescence, was carefully treated and polished that it might shine in its pristine splendor.

The Egyptian in comfortable circumstances was inclined to be particular about the art work that was chiselled into and painted on the side walls of his tomb. There is the

original owner of the tomb, who was a judge, and appropriated it himself. This necessitated some alterations in the general decorative scheme, consisting mostly of abbreviating the skirt of the powerless judge to princely lengths and eradicating the name of the original owner as often as it appeared. It is certain that Ra-Em-Kai had not completed things to his entire satisfaction when he was called to the great beyond, although he had done pretty well by himself, causing his figure to be drawn here and there in heroic size, as was the custom, with his son a diminutive figure at his feet. Although the son is in erect posture, a horizontal line drawn from the top of his head would scarcely more than pierce the ankle bone of his illustrious father.

The relief also shows the curing of fish and the preparation of bread and beer. There are dancing girls and men bringing cattle, antelope

4000-3700 B. C., whose objects are to be found in the First Egyptian room, the most interesting whilom personage is the middle class Egyptian, who has been previously referred to in this chronicle. He is as comfortable after six thousand years of death as might be expected, although the fact that he was buried in a contracted fashion, after the manner of his day, leads to the belief that perhaps for such a long stretch he might have been happier were his knees more remote from his chin. It was not until many dynasties had crumbled that this supposition was acted upon and interments made at full length.

The Earliest Inhabitant

"Recent archaeological investigations," declared a placard upon this grave, "have determined that the earliest habitation of the Nile Valley by the race we now know as the Egyptian took place about 4000 B. C. Slight traces remain of the villages or habitations of this early period, but their cemeteries have been found throughout Egypt proper and in Nubia. The interments are in the 'contracted' position, lying almost uniformly on the left side, with the head toward the south. In the grave, about the burial, are found pottery and stone vessels containing

was done in a substantial manner, and the burial chamber beneath the center of the limestone structure is so tiny by comparison as to warrant the belief that the pyramid supplied everything to be reasonably expected in the way of protection.

The "false door" of Nekahor is among those present, with the full title chiseled in stone and running as follows: "King's Descendant, Judge and Inferior Scribe, He Who Is Over Secrets, Priest of Maat (the Goddess of Truth), He Who Renders True Judgment, King's Priest, Priest of Userkof, Priest of Raem-sops." If the tomb failed there never was any doubt that an Egyptian dignitary would be sufficiently buried by his official titles.

Reliefs from the Royal Funerary Temples and Mastaba Tombs of the V and VI dynasties depict the "Marines on Shore," "A Festival Procession" and the "Prow of a Sailing Ship." There is another column from the pyramid temple of King Sahura, with camera plates showing the originals. This column, by the way, was excavated by a German expedition in Egypt.

Legless

The statue of Prince Adu, found in the pit of the tomb of Denderah, is complete save for the loss of both legs below the knee. Since the prince was laid away about 2495

first blush one is inclined to attribute this to the poor moving van facilities of ancient Egypt, but investigation proves rather that it was the custom to break everything that was interred with the bones, all of which came under the head of "killing the spirit."

A model of a riverboat is shown wherein the rowers, originally eleven on either side, are soldiers whose black and white bulls' shields are piled against the mast rests. The helmsman sits in the stern managing the large steering oar. In the bow is a fender of bulls' hide, and the mooring peg and mallet for driving the latter into the bank.

The coffin of Ameney is on exhibition and in it may be found the "false doors" by means of which "the spirit could come out of and return into the coffin." If it is possible that Ameney went forth at night to attend to table rappings and such then it is true that he must have dedicated the remainder of his time to the arduous task of squeezing in and out the "false door," for at best it seems a precarious hazard even for a peripatetic spirit.

The Seventh Egyptian Room shows objects taken from the daily life of the ancient Egyptians. Here may be found weights and measures. Here also is a rather new history about the Egyptian scribe who is depicted in three poses. The first of these reads, "Scribe with a palette under his arm standing before a writing table, on which are a pot for water and two writing tablets." The second, "Scribe writing with a reed brush on a slip of wood. He carries a long, narrow palette in a case under his right arm. In the end of the palette there are two circular depressions for paint, in the center a groove to hold a set of reed brushes," and the third, "With a brush over each ear and a palette with two circular depressions for paint in his left hand the scribe stands ready to submit his manuscript." It seemed to us that the scribe had rather a tight hold on his manuscript. It appeared probable that he would continue to exercise this grip until said space rates that he might go out and clothe himself properly.

A Shadow Clock

There are bronze measuring cups, balances and astronomical instruments. A shadow clock, by which time is ingeniously told by the position of the sun, may be seen, and there are charts of the stars. There is also a balance used to weigh the heart in the judgment of the dead.

Under the head of "Arms and Armor" come a bow and six arrows and a shield handle, and the models of soldiers armed with spear, round-headed mace, square-headed mace, battle axes and stick. The arrow heads are of wood, bronze, iron and flint. One such head is finished with a "button" such as is used in rapier play, and this was utilized for target practise or fowling. Daggers and knife blades add to the exhibit.

In the personal adornment line, the museum visitor beholds attractive rings worn either on the ear or pendant from the hair at the side of the head. They are made of faience, carnelian, shell and bronze. Strings of faience and glass beads meet the eye, and the finger rings are equipped with devices in lieu of settings that might be suitably used as seals. These are of faience, carnelian, bronze, shell and gold. From the period of 2000-1700 B. C. come stone beads of carnelian, amethyst, hematite and crystal make, while bracelets of bone, faience and stone had great vogue among the Egyptian belles. Ancient toilet articles and textiles are also on display, and the latter are finer in make than the best turned out in the present day. Indeed, a New York department store doubted whether it could supply a suitable textile background for one of these Coptic pieces.

The sculpture and painting of this early period is amply looked after, and the unfinished figure of the hippopotamus Goddess Thueris shows almost the first stage in carving a figure, the rectangular block of stone being reduced to a square cut figure of the required size. In the work on tombs there was a set rotation of the mason to cut the stone, the artist to draw the line sketch, the sculptor to carve the bas-relief and the painter to impose his mineral colors on the whole. The artist's sketches were drawn in black and corrected with red lines, and these corrections seem to have been no more frequent than in the case of the modern artist.

Funerary Model Boats (2000 B. C.)

Model boats were placed in the tomb to commemorate the pilgrimage which each mummy was supposed to make before burial to the shrine of the god Osiris at Abydos. They were usually made in pairs, one, with sails spread, representing the journey upstream; the other, without sails, for use on the return journey with the stream. These two boats were presented by the late J. Pierpont Morgan in 1912.

promoted to "Sole Companion," and even later to the high office of "Lord Chamberlain" or "Palace Leader." The fact that he had once occupied the comparatively unimportant position of mere "Companion" never would have been let out of the bag had it not been for his early tomb-making.

Perneb and his son constructed their tombs side by side at Sakkara in an area about 250 yards north of the "Step Pyramid" of King Zoser and just outside the great inclosure wall of that pyramid and its precinct. Expense was no object. Perneb reared himself a mighty edifice, with a burial chamber fifty feet below the ornamental superstructure, which contained the chapel or the offering-chamber. These walls were ordinarily covered with sculptured and painted scenes depicting the offering-ceremonies, and very often, too, the various activities and pleasures which the owner had pursued in the life which he had left behind. The second feature of the superstructure was the secret-chamber, or "serdab," where the portrait-statue of the owner and sometimes those of members of his family stood.

Were Perneb to alight from a Fifth Avenue bus and visit his own tomb as it has been reconstructed and preserved at the Metropolitan Museum doubtless he would be flattered beyond measure, certainly more so were he not informed of the disgraceful circumstances under which it was found by the modern day treasure hunters. Then one wall had ingloriously caved in, in spite of the contractor's assurance glibly given in 2655 B. C., and the tomb had been pillaged.

In plundering the ancient Egyptians left no stone unturned, particularly if it were a precious one. They often broke into the burial chamber and stripped the corpse of everything that could possibly be squandered. The offering chambers and the "serdabs" were searched with equal gusto, and it might be said that nothing remained that was not nailed down.

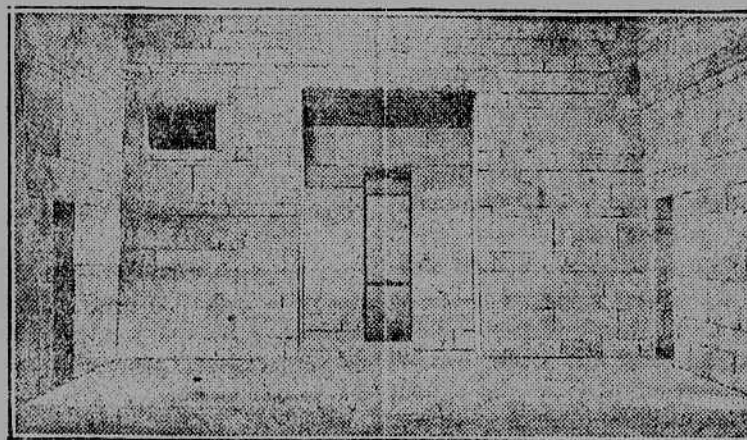
Keeping Up His Fame

Thus, so far as Perneb is concerned, if it is true that he has done much in contributing to the tone of the museum's Egyptian rooms the Egyptian department has done more to perpetuate the fame of Perneb.

chapel or offering chamber of the tomb of Prince Ra-Em-Kai, for instance. This treasure was acquired from the Egyptian government and is an interesting specimen. Cut in sharp-lined relief is the owner of the tomb, the corpse in point of fact, being drawn on a sledge toward his final resting place. Oil is sprinkled copiously beneath the runners of the sledge that it may be drawn easier. In visualizing his

and oryx to the deceased, while one bucaroo has come down through the centuries in the act of lassoing a gazelle. The gazelle is never quite captured and never exactly free—a situation that must be mutually embarrassing if the relief figures ever

Facade of the Tomb of Perneb



The tomb was purchased in 1913 from the Egyptian government, through the generosity of Edward S. Harkness. A key plan was made of the walls in situ; each stone was numbered as it was taken down and finally the whole tomb was re-erected in the museum exactly as it stood at Sakkara, the cemetery of the ancient capital, Memphis. The photograph shows the main entrance, the window by which the principal offering chamber was lighted, and two side doors, that on the left leading to a small chamber which communicates, by means of a slit in the wall, with the secret statue chamber. The tomb dates from about 2650 B. C.

own funeral procession the prince carried off everything on a grand scale. Ahead there paraded offering-bearers with their gifts to the late lamented, and meantime there was going on—from an artist's view, at least—a horrendous slaughter of oxen. The death of one prince in Egypt may have been felt in many quarters and by many persons, but by no one more than the Egyptian oxen.

Kicked Out of His Tomb

This relief work is excellently done, although there is evidence that Prince Ra-Em-Kai exercised his divine prerogatives in a distinctly Teutonic fashion, having kicked out

get a chance to talk things over. Further down there are harvesting scenes where the grain is being cut with donkeys carrying it away and treading out the product upon a threshing floor.

For the further convenience of the deceased there is an offering niche in the shape of a "false door" before which all offerings were laid. Behind the false door, with its lintel log in the center, was the portrait statue, and the spirit of the prince was at liberty any time to partake of the gifts and dainties placed at his shrine.

Dropping back to the prehistoric or predynastic period, approximately

the remains of food and drink; flint and other stone implements and weapons, and a variety of other objects such as are exhibited in this room, with which the dead were supplied as a provision for the future life."

By count there were in this predynastic grave seven vessels surprising in their symmetry, as, indeed, all ancient Egyptian ceramics are, along with the deceased's weapons, his decayed dress and withered bones. Covered over with glass, the grave an its inmate convey more the impression of an artistic haunting picture than a defunct gentleman of great vintage.

Small figures found in the graves seem to prove that in prehistoric days the Egyptians knew something of tattooing, but if so this ugly practise was dropped at a later date. These figurines with green lines about the eyes indicate the use of eye salve, evidently made from malachite, for little bags of malachite and galena, as well as slate palettes, are found in the graves of the open area. This eye salve was both highly decorative and helped keep away flies, of which Egypt had not less than its quota.

Articles of predynastic use may be observed on every hand. There are ivory combs decorated on both sides, flint knives and "sickle flints" for cutting, flint and crystal arrow heads, models of copper tools, glazed wall tiles, and a figure of a woman from the old Osiris temple at Abydos which takes the spectator back to the days of 3400 B. C. Here is a quaint wooden bed or bier, the legs held in place by thongs, and there a paneled wooden coffin and the rope with which the lid was lashed on.

"Humph," said a female visitor to the museum, "it looks like a modern rope!"

Skipping the Second Room, in which lies the Tomb of Perneb, and the Third, where the offering chamber of Prince Ra-Em-Kai is the outstanding figure, we come to the Fourth Room, which takes in the Old Kingdom and Transitional Period, about 3000-2100 B. C.

Here is a model of the pyramid of King Sahura, of the fifth dynasty, the original of which, it is said, was built about 2700 B. C. The pyramid is another instance of a living dignity making great preparation for his death, for the triangular structure in most cases was reared to protect a royal tomb, although it is said some were built with the idea of more easily obtaining meteorological observations.

The cross-section of King Sahura's pyramid shows that his job

B. C., and the statue with him, it is difficult to estimate how long he has been represented as doing without feet. By a singular nicety it so happens that in his statue the prince is seated, which is obviously one of the best of all postures for a footless image.

The Sixth Egyptian Room is notable for the excellence of its mummies. We are confronted, to begin with, with the mummy, coffin and box for canopic jars which contained the viscera of the Chief Treasurer, no less a personage than Ukh-Hotep, of the XII dynasty, who headed for unknown parts in the year 2000 B. C. If Ukh-Hotep was as imposing in life as he is in death the evidence would seem to be that chief treasurers have rather fallen off in their appearance during the last 4,000 years.

After the body was properly pickled in brine, as Herodotus avers, the mummy was laid in the coffin on its left side, with the face toward the eye panel, without which no coffin was complete. The mummy was covered with a shroud, with a string drawn at the neck, the highly decorative false face, manufactured from layers of papyrus, obscuring the genuine article. The body was then ready for its sarcophagus, and when exhumed centuries later is virtually as well preserved as ever, as in the case of the said Ukh-Hotep. "To be sure, Ukh is dead, but in death, so to speak, he has outlived many a gentleman who did not follow the Egyptian method."

The coffin is colorful and interesting. The decoration of it, so far as legible, consists of—

(1) Brief religious texts in boldly drawn hieroglyphs.

(2) Longer text in cursive hieroglyphs, namely (a) an early version of the so-called XVII chapter of the Book of the Dead, (b) an archaic offering-ritual, and (c) a list of food offerings.

(3) Pictures of food, of objects of personal use, of a doorway and of a pair of eyes.

As might be imagined, this entire decoration was designed with a view to its supposed benefit to the occupant of the coffin, or to Ukh-Hotep in this particular instance.

Mummifying reached its most elaborate heights during 1100 to 1000 B. C. When the shroud was removed and the papyrus face taken from Rameses II the archaeologists started back in surprise. The figure seemed alive—and ready to squirm.

Most of the statuettes, animal figures and pottery are broken. At